

The Importance of Work in the Treatment of Leprosy



OLD-TIMER AT SALDOHA

One thing that never fails to surprise and impress visitors to the Saldoha Leper Colony, whether Indian or friends from overseas, is to see nearly all the leper patients employed in the work. Especially when you take a round in the colony during the morning hours along the three miles of roads connecting the six small villages, you see sick people in their houses or gardens, in

fields, and workshops display an energy and initiative that is far beyond the custom of this country. Men and women, boys and girls, most of them with one or more dressings because of sores on arms or legs, some on crutches, all except the bed-ridden, are engaged in their particular jobs. Some of them have developed such technique and skill that only a close observer will

notice the loss of some or all of the fingers or toes.

It is not only to visitors that this is so unexpected. For the lepers themselves it has been a more or less welcome experience, when applying for admission, that they are "privileged" to work while receiving their medical treatment.

semi-starvation. And the unfortunates, suffering from leprosy, fare no better. While sick at home, they may have been trusted with attending the babies while parents were at work, and thus they had time to spread the disease before joining the vast army of India's beggars.

It was therefore of little wonder



LEPER BOYS CARRYING WATER IN BOYS' TOWN, SALDOHA

In a country like India, with too many people and too little food to go around, it is only partly true that "the workman is worthy of his mead." So little mercy is extended to the sick and old people who are unable to work that they are left to

that the first patients, who 25 years ago came and asked for shelter at Saldoha, were in such wretched condition that there was little we could do for them except dressing chronic sores and nursing them through their last few months or weeks.

Those who improved would call it a day when they had managed to gather a little fuel from the jungle and cook their own meal.

The Lepers Go to Work

The little leper community had functioned only briefly when the good nursing gave new strength and revealed another law of nature, that "idleness is the root of much evil." For moral reasons, as well as to further a sense of social order and responsibility, it became a necessity to arrange physical activities. That the necessity was not immediately evident to the patients, who in any case were served a square meal twice a day, was to be expected; but the preaching of the Gospel had already produced a cooperative spirit among them. Those who became Christians always took the lead in any new and useful enterprise.

The little Indian wooden plow was the natural thing with which to start. In the field the oxen set the pace and see that nobody is overworked. The plowman, however, decides the depth of the plowing and the result was poor. We then turned to construct paddy fields in terraces, levelling the ground and heaping earth around to hold the water for planting, the men digging with spades and pickaxes and the women carrying the earth in baskets on their heads. This kind of work had its drawbacks; the dry leprotic skin of hands and feet easily cracked and immediately created trophic sores, slow to heal. But rubbing with and injecting chaulmoogra oil was tried successfully. It soon

proved that regular exercise brought sensation and vitality back to the limbs, especially in cases of nerve-leprosy, and that working patients were able to stand and absorb larger dosages of the oil and showed better response to treatment than those loafing about.

We Find a Life-Saving Spring

We also began to replace our first leaf huts with solid mud houses. Men with strong feet prepared the mud; those with whole hands built the walls and cut the trees for the roof; water was raised from the river by swinging kerosene tins by a rope. This was heavy going. We therefore searched for living water which might be directed to the place where it was wanted. We found the spring a mile away. By the construction of an embankment we created a fall of 10 feet to the highest level of the colony. This meant that in a country, where in seven months hardly a drop of rain can be counted on, we could turn our colony into an oasis in the desert provided we were able to accomplish the feat. We succeeded. Besides rice and corn we now raised vegetables throughout the year and fodder grass for the dairy cattle, and created a sensation by introducing sugar cane in the district. This has since been taken up by Santals wherever water is available.

It took time and courage to start fruit cultivation. The plants must be protected with bamboo fencing; then the fence must be protected against white ants (no wonder you find few fruit trees in a Santal village). But



HUSKING RICE AT SALDOHA

somehow through trial and error we succeeded, and for years now we have picked the fruit of mango, breadfruit, guave, banana, and less known Indian varieties. And the surplus of water supplied us with things equally important, such as ponds for fishing, a sport as favored here as at home.

The Patients Acquire Many Trades

It became evident that skilled carpenters were needed for building the houses. Fortunately, wood work is an inborn gift with the Santals. We could place the young men in a workshop and teach them something that was of interest to them,

while they in time provided us with doors, windows, carts, plows, and equipment for the hospital. Next to the carpentry school a weaving school was started with 12 looms, which has supplied the hospital with linen and all the patients with an annual piece of cloth. To these trades have been added basket-making, blacksmithing, and shoemaking, which latter consists largely of the making of sandals from discarded automobile tires for the protection of hospital dressing during work. After finishing treatment and training with us, some of them later car-

ried on their trade in their home village.

Soon many of the able women were employed within the colony as cooks and nurses in the hospital, and children's and old people's homes. Actually, less than a dozen healthy workers are employed in the nursing of the 400 lepers, whose

The same is true for the men's rope-making from hemp which also is grown extensively in the colony.

Only once have we been baffled by the problem of finding suitable work for a patient. One of our ablest weavers turned blind from leprotic infection of the inner eye. He already had suffered from complete



HOSPITAL AT SALDOHA

frequent acute outbreaks of the disease often require hospitalization and usually keep our 30 hospital beds occupied. Besides that, after working hours in the morning, all the patients daily attend out-door treatment and dressing.

For the crippled women, working with cotton gives all varieties of employment according to their ability: there is the picking of the cotton, removing the seeds, whipping it for spinning, or preparing it for hospital use. Cotton work is a comfortable and sociable occupation that allows unlimited freedom of speech.

loss of sensation of the hands. Now he is trying hard to learn how to make rope; but we hope to find something more satisfactory for this otherwise-gifted young man.

It goes without saying that nothing produced in the colony is sold or used elsewhere. However, that has not prevented us from sending products from our workshops and farm in competition at the District Exhibitions. We already have brought home prizes for woodcraft and for a very useful hospital mattress.

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